

Suzanne Jaworski Rhodenbaugh

DOWN IN THE COLVER MINE

Down a rail track
out of the dust
and into the dark
for a mile or more,
down to where roof is low
and our steel-toed boots
slog water as we walk.

We pass warning signs,
an occasional bulb hanging
low and damp,
men working alone at places
for reasons I don't get.
Through the dust
in the headlamp beams
it looks black
and cold.

We go deeper,
harder,
to where the low roof creaks
and I shout to some men
mining coal.

I think they can die
in a roof fall,
electrocution,
explosion, no air,
get chewed up
by Continuous Miners,
starve or die
a hundred ways.

They laugh and eat lunch.

I'm a woman in the mine,
bad luck,
but no complaints from the men.
My gear rides different on my hips
but my hardhat's the color
the union men wear and nobody's eyes
as wide as mine are
down in the Colver Mine.

I tell the company man
I worry about those
in the lonely spots.
He spits his chaw
and thinks "shit"
but hell I'm from the union
so he doesn't say it.
The men think lonely
is funny and laugh.

I lie on my belly
for the trip back
on the coal belt,
fast and dangerous
and I love it,
the rotating steel bars
under my belly.

I'm out into air and sun,
coal dust in my ears and spit.
Back through the boneypiles
of Nanty Glo
I keep my face black,
my coveralls on.